



Who were the Jewish Maccabis?

The Jewish Maccabees were a group of Jewish rebel warriors who lived in the 2nd century BCE. They played a central role in the narrative of Hanukkah and are celebrated for their pivotal role in the recovery of Jerusalem and the subsequent rededication of the Second Temple, leading to the festival of Hanukkah in Jewish tradition. Their story is a compelling blend of religious zeal, guerrilla warfare, and the struggle for autonomy against oppressive rule.

The origins of the Maccabees trace back to a period of intense cultural and religious conflict in Judea, then part of the Hellenistic empire under the Seleucid dynasty. When Antiochus IV Epiphanes ascended to the Seleucid throne, he embarked on a campaign to Hellenize his domain, imposing Greek culture and religion on his subjects, including the Jews of Judea. This included the erection of a statue of Zeus in the Jewish Temple and the prohibition of Jewish religious practices, sparking widespread outrage among the Jewish population.

The Maccabean revolt began in 167 BCE when Mattathias, a Jewish priest from the rural village of Modi'in, and his five sons, led by Judah Maccabee, rebelled against the Seleucid forces. The surname "Maccabee," likely derived from the Aramaic word "Maqaba," meaning "the hammer," in reference to Judah's ferocity in battle, became a symbol of the resistance. The Maccabees employed guerrilla tactics, exploiting their knowledge of the local terrain to ambush and defeat larger, better-equipped Seleucid armies.

After the death of Mattathias, Judah Maccabee assumed leadership of the revolt. Under his guidance, the Maccabees achieved a series of victories, culminating in the recapture of Jerusalem in 164 BCE. They purified the Temple, removed the Greek symbols and altars, and rededicated it to the service of the Jewish God. The festival of Hanukkah ("dedication" in Hebrew) commemorates this rededication of the Temple and the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days, despite there being only enough consecrated oil for one day's lighting.

Following their initial successes, the Maccabees continued to fight for their independence from Seleucid rule. Their struggle eventually led to the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty, which provided a brief period of Jewish sovereignty in Judea until the Roman conquest.

The legacy of the Maccabees extends beyond their military achievements. They are celebrated for their commitment to the Jewish faith and laws at a time when external pressures sought to assimilate them into Hellenistic culture. Their story is a powerful example of resistance against oppression and the struggle for religious freedom, themes that resonate in many cultures and religious traditions to this day. The Maccabees' fight for independence and their dedication to preserving Jewish identity and practices have made them enduring symbols of courage and faith within Jewish history.